

# **DEATH** **and** **REDEMPTION**

**The Gulag and the Shaping of Soviet Society**

**Steven A. Barnes**

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*STEVEN A. BARNES*



PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

PRINCETON AND OXFORD

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Published by Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540  
In the United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, 6 Oxford Street,  
Woodstock, Oxfordshire OX20 1TW

press.princeton.edu

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Barnes, Steven Anthony.

Death and redemption : the Gulag and the shaping of Soviet society / Steven A. Barnes.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-691-15108-3 (hardcover : acid-free paper) —

ISBN 978-0-691-15112-0 (pbk. : acid-free paper)

1. Glavnoe upravlenie ispravitel'no-trudovykh lagerei OGPU—History.  
2. Gulag NKVD—History. 3. Concentration camps—Soviet Union—History.  
4. Concentration camps—Social aspects—Soviet Union—History. 5. Prisons—Soviet  
Union—History. 6. Prisons—Social aspects—Soviet Union—History. 7. Political  
prisoners—Soviet Union—Social conditions. 8. Prisoners—Soviet Union—Social  
conditions. 9. Forced labor—Social aspects—Soviet Union—History. 10. Soviet  
Union—Social conditions. I. Title.

HV9712.B27 2011

365'.4509470904—dc22 2010047824

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available

This book has been composed in Sabon

Printed on acid-free paper. ∞

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A book can never be completed without support and assistance from many sources. I would especially like to thank my doctoral adviser and friend, Amir Weiner, for his patience, valuable advice, and critique at every stage of the project. The final revisions would have never been finished without the expertise and advice of my mentor, colleague, and best friend at George Mason University, Rex Wade. Finally, special thanks goes to my graduate school colleague and longtime friend Andrew Jenks, who has challenged and sharpened my thinking over many years.

My research and writing was generously supported by Stanford University's Department of History, George Mason University's Department of History, the Anatole Mazour fund, the International Research Exchanges Board, the Giles Whiting Foundation, the Social Science Research Council, the MacArthur Consortium in International Peace and Cooperation coordinated by the Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University, the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University, the Kennan Institute at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, the Virginia E. Hazel Research Leave fund at George Mason University, and the Allen and Gwen Nelson Junior Faculty Research fund at George Mason University. Thanks also to the National Endowment for the Humanities for its support of the <http://gulaghistory.org> Web site, which now houses many documents used in this study.

Alma Sultangalieva, Kaidar Aldazhumanov, Zhambyl Artykbaev, and Diusetai Shaimukhanov were absolutely critical in generously smoothing the path to archival access in Kazakhstan. I am especially grateful to the underpaid and overworked staff of all the Russian and Kazakhstani archives used in the present study. Thanks also to the library and archives at the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace—a resource without parallel.

Stephen Kotkin graciously offered valuable advice at the project's earliest stages. Numerous other colleagues have provided intellectual critique and emotional support. My thanks to Norman Naimark, Terrence Emmons, Robert Crews, Katherine Jolluck, Lynne Viola, Claudia Verhoeven, Steven Harris, Matthew Romaniello, Charles Lipp, Cynthia Hooper, Miriam Dobson, Margaret Paxson, Yuri Slezkine, Elizabeth Wood, Jehanne Gheith, Pamela Kachurin, Golfo Alexopoulos, Ron Suny, Alexandru Lesanu, Eric Lohr, Richard Stites, Michael David-Fox, David Nordlander, Paula Michaels, Liz Tarlow, Penny Skalnik, Elizabeth Wood, Vladimir Brovkin, Stuart Finkel, Paul Stronski, and Ann Livschiz. The

anonymous readers for Princeton University Press offered challenging and helpful critique.

Special appreciation to all those who got me involved in the public and digital history of the Gulag, and helped me learn how to present the topic to a general audience. I hope this has found its way into my book. Thanks to Louis Hutchins, Marty Blatt, Viktor Shmyrov, Tatiana Kursina, Oleg Trushnikov, Roy Rosenzweig, Dan Cohen, Tom Scheinfeldt, Elena Razlogova, Stephanie Hurter, Gwen White, Anastasia Mikheeva, Sheila Brennan, Jeremy Boggs, Mikhail Vinokur, and David Hosford.

Participants in Stanford's Russian and East European history workshop read drafts of several chapters and offered valuable advice. Various parts of the text benefited from the participants in the Washington, DC, Russian history workshop as well as from workshops and conferences at the University of Maryland, the University of Chicago, the School of Slavic and East European Studies at University College London, Duke University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the University of California at Berkeley, Miami University in Ohio, the University of Toronto, Harvard University, and the University of Hawaii.

From the first day to the final printing, the assistance of the staff of the history departments at Stanford and George Mason was crucial. Special thanks goes to Monica Wheeler, Gertrud Pacheco, and Lynn Kaiser at Stanford, and Laura McCloskey, Sharon Bloomquist, Susie LeBlanc, and Carrie Grabo at George Mason.

The responsibility for the content is, of course, entirely my own.

Finally, thanks to my parents and my wife, Erika, for their personal support; to my two daughters, Julia and Emma; to the Don, the Doc, and the Bird for laughter unending; to Ron Shults for fostering in me a love of books; and to Vitalii and Iuliia Kapinos for the special friendship that made my time in Karaganda better than bearable.

## DEATH AND REDEMPTION





Maps of Kazakhstan (above) and the Soviet Union (top). City names given according to post-Soviet usage and with Russian spelling (earlier historical names provided in parentheses). Maps drawn by Stephanie Hurter.

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## INTRODUCTION

IN ONE OF THE TELLING EPISODES of his history of the Gulag, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn relates the tale of a prisoner ship convoy headed for the Dalstroi goldfields of the notorious Kolyma. As the convoy approached Magadan, the ships got stuck in the icy waters of the Kolyma River. The prisoners were forced to disembark and walk across the frozen river to the shore. Solzhenitsyn continues:

Nonetheless, continuing to play out the farce of correction, in other words, pretending they had brought not simply bones with which to pave the gold-bearing Kolyma but temporarily isolated Soviet citizens who would yet return to creative life, they were greeted by the Dalstroi orchestra. The orchestra played marches and waltzes.<sup>1</sup>

What could possibly seem more out of place than an orchestra trumpeting the arrival of a prisoner convoy into the depths of the Gulag?

In 1950, the American Alexander Dolgun sat outside the gates of the Steplag labor camp in the Karaganda region of Kazakhstan. His welcome to the camp was almost surreal.

I began to feel as though I was hallucinating again because I could hear music, a band, playing some kind of bravura march. It sounded weak and the instruments were not well tuned, but the rhythm was fast and I was sure it was coming from inside the gate. I had a sense of deep cosmic horror that made me dizzy. In the distance I could see the silhouette of the corpses on the wagon. The band seemed to be playing some kind of grotesque farewell. Then it got worse. Out of the gate came, in lines of five abreast, a column of *walking* corpses in black cotton jackets with white number patches. . . . The music . . . came from a pitiful little band of prisoners lined up near the . . . guardhouse. . . . Faces of death playing a lively march.<sup>2</sup>

The Gulag was a massive phenomenon. Understood here in its broadest sense as the entire Soviet forced labor detention system, the Gulag destroyed the lives of a large portion of the Soviet population.<sup>3</sup> The overall detained population in the camps, colonies, prisons, and internal exile reached a maximum in the early 1950s well in excess of 5 million people. Throughout the Stalin era, some 18 million people passed through the prisons and camps of the Gulag, and another 6 or 7 million were subject to internal exile. From 1921 to 1953, according to official figures, some 800,000 people were sentenced to death by the Soviet secret police organs alone. Furthermore, no fewer than 1.6 million died in the appalling conditions of the Gulag camps. We will never know for certain

how many died during the process of exile, but that number also likely exceeds 1 million people. While these numbers are smaller than we once thought, they still bespeak an enormous institution that touched the lives of a tremendous portion of the Soviet population, whether as prisoners themselves, or as their relatives, coworkers, or friends. Even those who survived had their lives destroyed by this brutal institution.<sup>4</sup>

Yet conceptualizing the role played by the Gulag in the Soviet polity is fraught with apparent contradictions. Exploitation, oppression, and mass death coexisted with reeducation, redemption, and mass release. Solzhenitsyn copes with the contradiction by relegating correction to the category of farce—one more sadistic, cruel joke perpetrated by an unjust, immoral, and atheistic regime. Nevertheless, one cannot avoid asking why the Soviet authorities went to such lengths to maintain the “farce of correction.” Why were these new arrivals to the “Arctic death camps” of Kolyma or those in the Kazakh steppe greeted not by a show of force but rather by an orchestra playing marches and waltzes?<sup>5</sup> Why did Soviet authorities expend such tremendous energy to replicate the Soviet social and cultural system within the Gulag via an extensive indoctrination network—a continuous process extending from the prisoner’s arrival until their departure (dead or alive)? Soviet authorities had the know-how, experience, facilities, and will to violence to exterminate every one of the millions who passed through the Gulag, but they chose not to create a truly genocidal institution.

This book will explore the Gulag through these contradictions. It provides a close study of the camps and exiles in the Karaganda region of Kazakhstan along with a general reconsideration of the scope, meaning, and function of the Gulag in Joseph Stalin’s Soviet Union. Focusing on Karaganda offers a number of benefits to an examination of the history of the Gulag. First, a concentrated look at a single locality allows for a study of the massive phenomenon of the Gulag without giving up the chronological breadth that is important to understanding shifts in its operations through the period (approximately 1930–57) when it was at its height. Second, exploring the Gulag at the local level reveals the operation of the system at the very point of contact between Soviet authority and its detained subjects. If one limited their study of the Gulag to the directives emanating from Moscow, a key part of the story would be lost, as these directives were frequently altered, ignored, or undermined at the local level. Moscow’s directives were often contradictory or at least competitive with one another. The Gulag served many different functions—economic and penal—and the demands of one function usually interfered with another. At the local level, camp authorities were forced to work through these contradictory demands to decide what held priority. Third, Karaganda is a particularly advantageous location to carry

out a local study. It housed one of the largest and longest lasting of the Gulag's corrective labor camps—the agricultural camp Karlag. Simultaneously, the Karaganda region was a destination for significant populations of internally exiled peoples—the special settlers—allowing for the study of the relationship between exile and camps in the Gulag universe. Furthermore, Karaganda included four of the limited number of special camps (*osobyie lageri*) created after 1948, and one of those, Steplag, was the sight of one of the three major prisoner uprisings in the immediate post-Stalin era. Karaganda was one of few locales to experience most of the major institutions and events of the Gulag's history. As such, it is not necessarily representative of all other Gulag institutions. Only two other locales also experienced every one of these phenomena (Vorkuta and Noril'sk). Still, it does allow for a close examination of a wide array of the events and institutions in the Gulag, and facilitates an overall evaluation of the system's operation.

It is not wise, however, to limit one's consideration to a particular locale when exploring the Gulag's role in the Soviet Union. While a fixed locality gives a certain manageability and entry point to a study of the Gulag, and each Gulag camp had certain particularities, an important general story must be told in order to conceptualize the full role that the system played in the Soviet Union. The Gulag consisted of all its institutions operating together. Different types of institutions and different institutions of the same type operated together in a systematic hierarchy that allowed for the placement of prisoners in accord with their perceived level of danger. Moreover, the circulation throughout the system of prisoners, central directives, and reports on major events in specific camps created a certain amount of uniformity and shared culture across the Gulag. The entire institution must be understood with reference to its myriad parts. Consequently, this study attempts to understand both the particularities of one local Gulag experience, while also exploring the general story of the Gulag system. As such, when necessary to this more general story, I will draw on materials from other Gulag camps.

This book is based on a number of important sources. First, the central Gulag administration archives along with other materials from the central secret police apparatus provide a global view of the system along with its rules and priorities. Second, local administrative documents and individual prisoner files from the Karlag and Steplag archives in Karaganda reveal the interaction between Karaganda and Moscow as well as the attempt of local authorities to wade through competing demands from Moscow. While these administrative documents are crucial to understanding the purpose and structure of the Gulag system, they are not sufficient in themselves to reveal how Gulag inmates subjectively experienced the camps.<sup>6</sup> Individual prisoner memoirs show the reality of the

Gulag experience and allow an extensive consideration of social identity in the Gulag.

Given the veritable mountain of source material now available, it is critical that the scholar make difficult choices to keep the topic manageable while not giving up the breadth of source types that provide a fuller picture of life in the Gulag.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, some scholars have argued for the elimination of memoir sources from our repertoire due to their problematic nature.<sup>8</sup> Memoir sources, of course, must be subject to the same level of critical analysis as any other type of source. They are not without their problems, though as we will see throughout this study, official documents can also give a skewed picture of reality on the ground. Gulag memoirs, rarely written contemporaneous with the events that they describe, raise the difficult question of the accuracy of memory. The necessarily selective nature of the memories that their authors choose to reveal can often reflect the author's political, philosophical, or religious concerns along with a concern to "testify," thereby preserving the memory of their experience.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, memoirs are frequently impacted by other entries into the genre, as their authors are usually influenced consciously or unconsciously by the things they have read.<sup>10</sup> By their very existence as Gulag memoirists, authors were "victims" of the Soviet regime and hence prone to an especially negative outlook on the Soviet system, yet as we will see, not all of them were or became opponents of that regime. Thus, memoirs can seem an inextricable mix of partial, unreliable, individual and/or collective memory combined with the current concerns of authors at the time they write.<sup>11</sup>

This, however, focuses only on the problems with memoirs. They reveal the subjective experience of the camps as understood at a given moment in time. They must be used to supplement the understanding of the camps that one gets from official documents. Things from above often look quite different than things on the ground. The subjective experience of memoirs is also critical to getting some sense of how Gulag prisoners lived in (and in the case of memoirists, survived) the camps. Their point of view certainly must be scrutinized, as I do especially in chapters 3–6 when discussing Gulag "identities." Still, no memoir is *a priori* unusable. In fact, as we will see, historians like Solzhenitsyn accomplished a great deal with the use of memoir and oral testimony alone.<sup>12</sup>

The first three chapters of the book focus on the 1930s' Gulag, looking at the institutions, practices, and identities that emerged in the Soviet penal system. The following three chapters explore the evolution of those institutions, practices, and identities through the cataclysmic events of total war, postwar reconstruction, and the emergence of new leadership after the death of Stalin. Chapter 1 offers a general reconsideration of the Gulag's origins and the role it played in Stalin's Soviet Union, and an

extended look at the variety of institutions that together made up this penal universe. The Gulag must be understood through a consideration of all its major institutions, showing how they worked together as an entire penal system and how they evolved over time. Chapter 2 looks at the Gulag and the Karaganda camps in the foundational era—the 1930s—and the practices of the camp system as they were shaped in that important decade. Only by exploring the wide array of Gulag practices can we understand the variety of functions of the Gulag and how the local camp authorities waded through the often-competing demands from the center. Chapter 3 offers a conceptualization of the identities of Gulag inmates as foisted on them by Soviet authorities and as understood by the prisoners themselves. The chapter reveals how these identities significantly shaped the means and capacity for survival in the Gulag system, as a complex matrix of identities emerged that ordered prisoners hierarchically from the most to the least redeemable.

Going beyond the late 1930s, which is too often treated as an end point in the history of Stalinism, chapter 4 concentrates on the Gulag during the Armageddon of the Great Patriotic War. It shows how the institutions, practices, and identities of the Gulag shifted in accord with the demands of total war. The war was an era of mass release on an unprecedented scale side by side with the highest mortality rates in the history of the Gulag system. Chapter 5 takes the Gulag into the postwar era when authorities used the institution in an attempt to reassert social control. At the same time, arrivals from the newly annexed western territories and former Red Army soldiers dramatically altered the social world of the Gulag prisoner. With the creation of the special camps for an exclusive portion of the political prisoner population, Gulag authorities unwittingly set the stage for violent resistance from their prisoners in the post-Stalin era. Finally, chapter 6 looks at the explosive uprisings in the Gulag after Stalin's death with a particular focus on the forty-day revolt at the Kengir division of Steplag. It also examines the new leadership's policy that largely emptied the camp and exile systems of all those charged with either petty or political offenses, dramatically altering the Soviet penal system for good.

The Gulag had its roots in the immediate aftermath of the October Revolution. The growth and development of the Gulag can be tied directly to the broader events in Soviet history.<sup>13</sup> The Gulag gave birth to a society that mirrored in so many ways Soviet society at large: hierarchies of class and nationality, sharp distinctions between political and nonpolitical inmates, veteran prestige after the war, and reconstruction of gender identities. So, too, the Gulag experienced and participated in the campaigns of Stalin's revolution, including such things as cultural transformation, political education, industrialization, shock work, and

Stakhanovism. Prisoners suffered from food shortages, usually at a more severe level, when the same occurred in Soviet society at large. The Great Patriotic War rocked and reshaped the Gulag, while surveillance permeated its spaces much as in Soviet society itself. No less was the Gulag shaken by the death of Stalin. The mass camp strikes after Stalin's death paraded a strikingly Sovietized population. On the one hand, Stalin's death was cause for joyous celebration among the prisoners. On the other hand, prison uprisings were formulated as workers' strikes. What were the demands of these prisoners? Unconditional release? No, they wanted to receive treatment equal to other workers. They sought to be included in the Soviet working class and Soviet society.

These are the outlines of the story to be told, the contradictions to be explored, to reconceptualize the operation of the Gulag—one of the most brutal institutions of a lethal twentieth century.



## Chapter 1

# THE ORIGINS, FUNCTIONS, AND INSTITUTIONS OF THE GULAG

WHILE EARLY STUDENTS of Soviet history certainly identified terror as perhaps the definitive characteristic of the Soviet polity, their abiding conviction that a sentence in the Gulag represented *death* inhibited serious study of *life* within the Gulag. Even for those few scholars who sought methodically to understand life in the Gulag, the camp was little more than a site of exploitation and inevitable death. While terror, and the Gulag as an integral part of that terror, found itself at the center of early conceptualizations of the Soviet experience, the prisoner was thoroughly marginalized from understandings of the revolutionary transformation of society.<sup>1</sup>

Scholars of the Gulag have understood its emergence and role in the Soviet Union primarily in three distinct yet overlapping ways, emphasizing in turn the economic, the political, and the moral. While no scholar offers a monocausal explanation of the Gulag, they have typically placed particular stress on one of these factors. The economic understanding posits the Gulag as essentially a slave labor system emerging as a result of Stalin's crash industrialization policies.<sup>2</sup> Even proponents of this approach understand its limitations. The camp system was far from economically efficient, even in the world of inefficient Soviet industry.<sup>3</sup> Arrests occurred chaotically and inefficiently, catching camp administrators unaware and unprepared. Arrests were not limited to healthy young men who could withstand work in the Gulag's harsh climates but also included women, children, the elderly, and invalids. Anne Applebaum, for instance, notes that the economic "illogic" of the mass arrests have led "many to conclude that arrests were carried out primarily to eliminate Stalin's perceived enemies, and only secondarily to fill Stalin's camps." Like many others before her, Applebaum argues that the explanations are not "entirely mutually exclusive either. Stalin might well have intended his arrests both to eliminate enemies and to create slave laborers."<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, she generally adopts the economic motive for understanding the Gulag. This book, a careful study of life inside the Gulag's institutions, will show the limitations of the economic understanding of the Soviet penal system. Many aspects of Gulag administration on the day-to-day level belie any economic rationality, and point to the camps as penal